

April 28, 2021

To: Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority

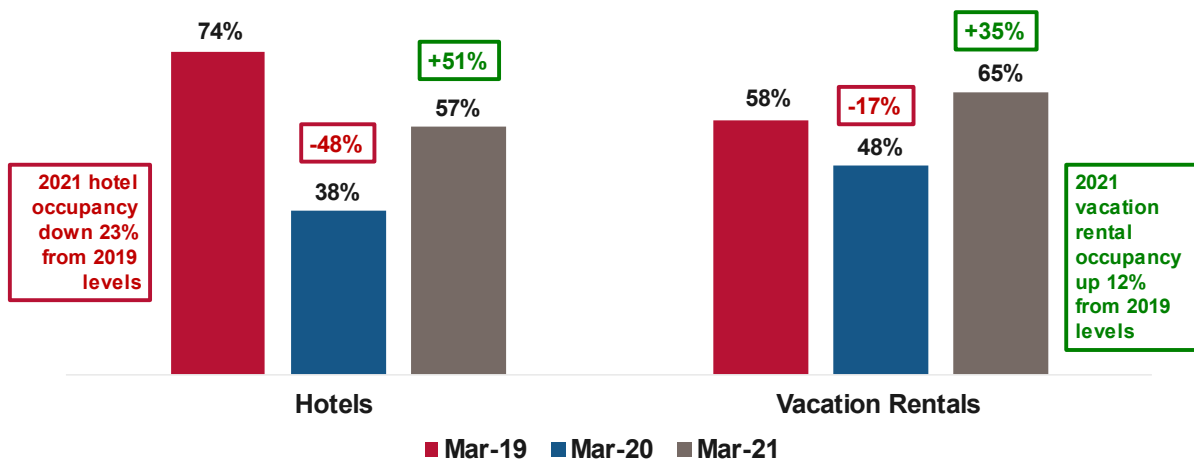
From: Vic Isley

Subject: President & CEO's Report of March 2021 Activities

As we mark one year of the massive impacts Covid-19 has had on our entire community including tourism, overnight stays and the value the visitors bring to Buncombe County continue to suffer, but we are starting to see signs of year-over-year recovery.

- Hotel occupancy for the month of March 2021 was 57 percent, up 51% from the devastating low of 38% in March of 2020. March 2021 occupancy still remains 23% down from 2019 levels that reached 74% in March.
- A bright spot in overnight stays continues to be the short-term vacation rental market. This is good news for local residents who own vacation rentals and are earning more and benefitting from the return of visitors to our community. March 2021 vacation rental occupancy was up 35% percent reaching 65% percent which is even higher (12%) than 2019 levels that reached 58%.

MAR LODGING OCCUPANCY



As more vaccines are administered, the desire for Americans to return to travel continue to climb. In March, Explore Asheville implemented a phased approach, relaunching a paid media strategy to welcome visitors to our community. The return of visitors to Asheville and Buncombe County help support jobs for local residents and new revenue for area businesses.

MARCH BY THE NUMBERS

- During March, the sales team posted 875 personal contacts (up 12%). March sales activities generated 61 sales leads (up 17%) and 32 convention bookings (up 60%), representing 2,012 rooms (up 45%). Nine months into the fiscal year, year-to-date bookings are down 41 percent and room nights represented are down 52 percent.
- CVB sales leads generated seven group events in March (down 59%), with corresponding revenue of \$206,879 (down 71%). The services team assisted 11 groups (down 45%).
- The PR team landed 41 significant placements in March (up 46%), with 30 media touchpoints (down 58%). The publicity value of print and broadcast placements totaled \$168k with reach of 2.1 million. Online placements added \$1.7 million in value and reach of more than 900 million.
- ExploreAsheville.com attracted 521,356 visits (up 88%), including 373,422 to the mobile site (up 104%). Our Facebook fan base total is 300,023 (up 1%) and video views totaled 22,627 (down 40%).
- In March 2021, there were 3,024 Asheville Visitor Guide requests compared to 1,422 the previous year (up 113%).
- Paid search generated 100k site visits in March with average time on site of 1:22 and an average of 2.01 pageviews per visit; click through rate was 18.6 percent.
- Online hotel reservations totaled 71 room nights (up 810%) with total room revenue of \$8,726 (up 3,012%).
- The Asheville Visitor Center welcomed 6,134 visitors (flat), and the Pack Square Park Visitor Pavilion remains closed. The Black Mountain Visitor center welcomed 1,812 visitors (up 163%).

LODGING & AIRPORT RESULTS

- Buncombe County Finance reported lodging sales totaling \$23,556,560 in February (down 12%).
- Smith Travel Research reported hotel occupancy of 44.5 percent during February (down 21%). The average daily room rate was \$115.35 (down 14%), and RevPAR (revenue per available room) was \$51.33 (down 32%). Room demand decreased 17 percent with 108,012 rooms sold.
- AirDNA reported short term rental occupancy of 54 percent (up 35%), ADR of \$101.59 (up 10%), and RevPAR of \$54.66 (up 48%). Total demand for short term rentals increased 18 percent to total 81,022 rooms sold.
- Passengers at the Asheville Regional Airport decreased 57 percent to total 45,617 in February.

MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS

Project Updates:

- Rolling launch of paid media began in March with paid social. Other media partner creative is in development with in-market dates slated throughout April.
- Production of new creative continued through March and new video spots will be finalized and rolled out in April. There will be 6 iterations which include:
 - :30 Asheville generic
 - :15 Culinary
 - :15 Outdoors/wellness
 - :15 Creative Spirit
 - :06 Creative Spirit
 - :06 Culinary
- Locked in partnerships and started content development with Garden & Gun, Food & Wine, Travel + Leisure and AFAR. Content should go live in April.
- Planning for productions with both Samantha Brown's "Places to Love" and Matador began in March and continues throughout April. Both shoots will take place in May.
- Created new blog post on Solo Travel in Asheville in conjunction with National Plan for Solo Vacation Day (March 1) authored by Lauren Gay/Outdoorsy Diva, board member of the Black Travel Alliance.
- Updated website with spring seasonal content and published two new blog posts focused on driving traffic during season: A Spring Guide to Asheville and Spring Break in Asheville, which were amplified via social and email distribution.
- Logged 30 media touchpoints, initiated 30 pitches, and supported 4 media on the ground in Asheville in March.
- Provided story support for *AFAR*, *NBC's The Today Show*, *Real Simple*, *Country Magazine*, *Reader's Digest* and *AAA Go Magazine*. Photo support provided for *AFAR*, *Family Vacationist*, *Our State*, *Mt. Pleasant Magazine*, *Winston-Salem Journal* and *TravelMag.com*.
- Safe Meeting Press Release: Finalized media outreach on the Safe Meeting Case Studies, expanded virtual-planning resources, group offerings and services provided by the Sales Team. The pitch was shared via email with 29 writers and editors of meetings publications.
- Vetting broadcast opportunities with PBS The Highpointers, shooting this summer, and HGTV Dreamhome, likely moving to 2022.
- Connected with McKibbin on an upcoming influencer FAM and how the team can support and engage to encourage coverage of local retail and small businesses.
- Lead sent to partners regarding coverage of Asheville accommodations with sustainability and community connections for AFAR.com. Collected info and drafted media briefing doc.
- Work to update, refine and streamline SOP documents to help improve earned media monitoring and PR metrics workflow.
- Chow Chow insights for Vic ahead of meeting with executive director, Rebecca Lynch.
- Crafted wellness media pitch with a focus on what's new in the destination.
- Provided Asheville content for BRPA's Spring/Summer Traveler E-Newsletter.
- Leave No Trace discussions and initial planning.
- Worked on air service efforts.
- Marketing planning retreat for FY22.
- Started term on U.S. Travel Destination Council.

Future Updates:

- Distribution of the wellness pitch.
- Planning for upcoming site visits for *Fortune*, *Places to Love* (scouting), *Travel Jewels* and *The Sophisticated Life* blog.
- Planning underway for upcoming spring photo and video shoots.

- Work began with Experian to provide expansive update of audience profiles.
- Creative asset testing.
- Addition of South Slope Mural Trail to web site.
- Onboard new marketing/PR assistant.

GROUP SALES & SERVICES

Project Updates:

- Closer to Home Self Directed FAM initiative targeting the drive meeting market generated 62 requests for more information on visiting and generated 24 confirmed reservations to date. March had 19 visitors including the office of Knoxville Area Assn of Realtors, influencers for the TN Association of Realtors Annual Conference with 825 rooms.
- Held Mug Moments #5 featuring Chris Levine and part of his sales team at The Omni Grove Park Inn Resort with 132 registered attendees.
- Started new project on identifying and soliciting business from Certified Benefit Corporations (B-Corps) to yield meetings from these purpose driven companies.
- Hosted quarterly DOS meeting.
- Further work with Community Engagement and Sales collaboration efforts.
- Had follow up meeting with Meetings Database Inc. regarding data analytics project for group business.
- Met with Gran Fondo along with the Sports Commission about a premier biking event. They were here to discuss their past events and a possible bike route for this fall with a three-night stay and the potential of 400 room nights. Lead has not gone out yet; will wait until client is confident it can be done here successfully.
- Staff hosted a site visit with the NC Soil and Water Conservation Districts for a 75-room event in 2021 and a 2023 755 room night conference. Susan Francois of HelmsBriscoe came to Asheville for her first time to look at the city and hotels for consideration for her large client base. Also hosted a site visit with Bucket List Tours resulting in a lead with 45 rooms for 2022 and a second site visit for T&T with Judy Perl Worldwide Travel.
- Virtually attended the following trade/industry meetings
 - Reston Herndon Meeting Planners Meeting with 164 attendees
 - Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast
 - Attended the NC Business Travel Assn's event on "The Buyers are Back"
 - Attended the PCMA Community Conversations: Independent Event Organizers
 - Attended SoCon Press Conference
 - Joined in PCMA's Community Conversations on Independent Event Organizers
 - Attended MPI Webinar on the Great Restart
 - PCMA Webinar on Education Program
 - Attended UNCA Noontime with the Bulldogs
 - Attended the NC Sports Assn Member Meeting
 - Attended State of the Industry – Sports Focus
 - Cvent webinar: Meeting & Event Trends
 - Some attended the BCTDA Monthly meeting and Annual Planning Retreat
- 19 wedding guides were downloaded this March versus 8 last March (up 238%).
- March bookings included (but are not limited to):
 - 2021 May - Blue Ridge Classic of the Carolinas – 80 rooms
 - 2021 June - All League Baseball Q3 – 125 rooms
 - 2021 June - All League Baseball Q4 – 125 rooms
 - 2021 Nov - Compass Group USA SE Reg Meeting – 50 rooms
 - 2021 May - NC Federation of Republican Women Western Region – 110 rooms
 - 2022 Sept - Democratic Attorney General Assn– 173 rooms

- 2021 April - Maximum Cheer and Dance – 40 rooms
- 2021 March - AAI Staff Retreat – 18 rooms
- 2021 April - Comfort Systems – 105 rooms
- 2021 April - Buyers Intelligence Group – 45 rooms
- 2022 Sept - Southern Headache Society – 325 rooms
- 2021 Sept – Doosan Portable Power – 160 rooms
- 2021 and 2022 – 8 Tour Groups – 461 rooms
- 2021 and 2022 – 15 Weddings – 625 rooms
- Worked with Association Executives of NC to publish the Meet Safe information on their Covid Resource Page.
- The meeting sales press release, *EXPLORE ASHEVILLE CVB RELEASES NEW TOOLKIT FOR MEETING SAFELY & VIRTUAL PLANNING: Case Studies From Recent In-Person Events + Virtual FAM Experience + New Group Offerings*, was sent to the PR team's media list and it was featured on TheMeetingMagazines.com.
- Explore Asheville team met with Laura Libby (Miles Partnership) to discuss meetings media planning for 2021-22.
- Sales managers on LinkedIn had 4 posts and received 3,736 views while our EA Mtgs and Convention page received 284 impressions and is up to 327 followers.
- Created three microsites – Grapple 2021, USSSA State Championship and Super Reginal.
- Coordinated details of an airline expansion site visit hosted by the Asheville Regional Airport, Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and Explore Asheville.
- Provide Southern Conference Championships support (VIP and Staff gifts) to participating hotels. There were 8 host hotels, and gifts went to team coaches, SoCon staff and organizers, and other VIP guests.

Future Updates:

- Progress on B-Corp Efforts.
- MDI to provide report writing opportunities from their research for solicitation.
- New outcomes of Sales and Community Relations efforts.
- Provide update on American Bus Association Virtual Event.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Project Updates:

- In February, 65 partner account updates, 176 calendar events, and 3,024 individual Visitor Guide requests were processed.
- Eight new partners were added in March: Kafe Neo Espresso Bar, Kafe Neo Espresso Bar West, Blueberry Rocket Studios, Liz Lane Gallery, Skin Spa Asheville, Asheville Wine Tours, Jettie Rae's Oyster House, and Patton Parker House.
- Two partner accounts were cancelled in March: Jonas Gerard Gallery's Clingman Avenue location closed (the Riverview location remains open) and The Aberdeen Inn Bed & Breakfast has permanently closed.
- Six One-on-One Wednesday sessions were held: three with current partners for listing/extranet/general support and three new partners/new staff.
- Hosted 2021 Hospitality Outlook on March 10 with 93 registrants in attendance. Adam Sacks from Tourism Economics was the Keynote Speaker.
- Calendar submission form on the frontend and in the extranet undergoing updates to improve usability for partners submitting events.
- Improvements to partner support benefit information and onboarding process on AshevilleCVB.com are in development with the JB Media team.

- CE team members hosted a table at Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast focused on Equity in Creative Placemaking, and attended the following community meetings: RAD Leadership Roundtable, African American Business Association, Lunch & Leads, the Downtown Commission's subcommittee on Parking & Transportation, the Block Community Collaborative, the Chamber's Member Advisory Council, the Asheville Bed & Breakfast Association, the Riverfront Leadership Roundtable meeting, and AIGA Business Outreach Committee Meeting.
- Wayfinding: Spring maintenance occurred on all signs throughout the county as well as completion of punch list items for the new RAD signage system; the online inventory management system was set up and customized for the destination enabling more efficient annual upkeep; and continued efforts for the kiosk content refresh project are in progress.
- TPDF: Exploring capital needs of performing arts venues and outdoor cultural events related to COVID restrictions with various community partners; two funding requests were presented to the BCTDA from The Wortham Center and the Asheville Downtown Association; the BCTDA voted to reengage the TPDF Committee to review the requests and make a funding recommendation; the Asheville Downtown Association later withdrew its request. The TPDF Committee met to review the proposal from The Wortham Center and will present a recommendation at the April board meeting.
- TPDF recognition for Riverfront Development Project: City planning to host virtual ribbon-cutting on April 23 at noon via Zoom, Vic invited to comment during recognition of funders.
- African American Heritage Trail: the research phase is underway with the goal of preparing materials for a community input effort in late summer. The project team and staff went on tours of the YMI and Hood Huggers. Research team attended "Black Placemaking for Culture" Webinar hosted by Conservation Trust for North Carolina.
- Team members continue with Brainery and Lenoir Rhyne Equity, Diversity & Inclusion certification coursework.

Future Updates:

- Planning underway for the Tourism Summit 2021, a four-part virtual series of panel discussions on the four new pillars with partners and community partners.
- A staff service day is in development to clean-up in the River Arts District on May 7 in coordination with GreenWorks, RAD and RADBA to assist with the RAD community's month-long grand opening celebrations.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Project Updates:

- Wrote and published six partner e-newsletters or e-alerts, including the *Tourism Community Update* on March 29 (overview of the BCTDA board meeting and planning retreat) and notices to the lodging community about the annual Hospitality Outlook. In total in the month of March, nearly 7,400 emails were delivered among the six communications with an open rate as high as 42.9 percent, well exceeding industry averages.
- New and updated content written and published on AshevilleCVB.com included: a new page containing documents, recordings, and presentations broken out by speakers at the BCTDA annual planning retreat; WLOS Pandemic Special (for which Vic Isley was a featured on-air guest); retirement of Dianna Pierce; One Buncombe Fund; Meetings Toolkit press release; updates to COVID resource page; recording and documents from Hospitality Outlook; e-newsletters and alerts, including the *Tourism Community Update*.
- Social media communications included: *Tourism Community Update*; retirement of Dianna Pierce; SBA webinar on Shuttered Venue Operators Grant; promotion of the Omni Grove Park Inn Job Fair, AIR Job Board, and other employment opportunities; March BCTDA

board meeting; the collaboration between AIR and Mission Health to vaccinate restaurant employees; opportunity to order Visitor Guides; Chamber Challenge 5K and Explore Asheville Team; Leadership Asheville Buzz Breakfast (CVB-sponsored); PPP and other COVID relief info; expanded service at AVL; WLOS story on outlook for tourism with Vic interviewed.

- Responded to several requests for interviews, quotes, or information, including:
 - Mountain Xpress: [The better than normal: Tourism projects roaring year for Buncombe visitation](#)
 - WLOS-TV: Worked closely with producer of the half-hour pandemic news special, "[Coronavirus: The Path Forward](#)," to include scripting, promotion and coordinating interviews with Vic, Jane Anderson, and AIR member Kevin Westmoreland.
 - Mountain Xpress: [Out of Order: Haywood Street Restrooms Face Permanent Closure](#) (pp. 11-12) - Provided comments on downtown public restroom issues and whether TPDF could fund.
 - WLOS-TV: Provided assistance for a story on the \$51 million coming to Buncombe that could potentially provide relief to the tourism community.
 - Brevard Newsbeat: [Tourism tax money helps with trail projects. But it could do more?](#)
 - Capital at Play: Provided backgrounder on impact of pandemic on tourism community and outlook for the future
 - WLOS-TV: [Officials feel optimistic about Western North Carolina's 2021 tourism outlook](#) – includes interview with Vic
- Other relevant coverage:
 - Asheville Citizen Times: [Asheville hotel owners, Republican senator disagree on cutting taxes for tourism marketing](#)
 - Mountain Xpress letter to editor: [Where are tourism workers' views on tourism plans](#)
 - Mountain Xpress: [Proposed state COVID -19 tax relief worries Buncombe officials](#)
 - Smoky Mountain News: Commentary [How many visitors are too many?](#)
- Press Releases/Advisories sent:
 - [Tourism Jobs Recovery Fund 6-month progress report](#)

Future Updates:

- Join the Marketing Department as a team member and integrate functions and responsibilities.

PRESIDENT & CEO + EXECUTIVE OFFICE

Project Updates:

- Scheduled BCTDA members to meet individually with RedSky Strategy to provide input on the strategic pillars that are in development.
- Executed the BCTDA's regular monthly board meeting virtually on March 25. Highlights of the meeting included: Revenue Objective for FY 22 was set at a 9% increase over FY 19 revenue, and the TPDF committee was reengaged to review two new collaborative projects from prior grant recipients. Gratitude and well wishes were extended to outgoing VP of Sales Dianna Pierce, who retired after 26 years of service with the Explore Asheville CVB.
- Executed the BCTDA's Annual Planning Retreat virtually March 25-26, where the board gleaned insights on each of the pillars from national and international thought leaders and provided input during facilitated discussions. The Four Strategic Pillars: Deliver Balanced Recovery and Sustainable Growth; Encourage Safe and Responsible Travel; Engage & Invite More Diverse Audiences; Promote & Support Asheville's Creative Spirit. Bios of the speakers and facilitators can be [found here](#).
- Attended a retirement reception for Dianna Pierce, coordinated by members of the CVB and hosted by The Omni Grove Park Inn.

- Departmental retreats and budget meetings were held to continue developing the FY 22 budget and program of work.
- A fire inspection was completed, and the minor findings found were corrected.
- The team worked with partners to plan and execute a site visit for an air service development opportunity.
- Vic co-hosted the Hospitality Outlook w/ Adam Sacks, and participated in EA's Quarterly DOS meeting and the NCRLA Asheville Chapter meeting.
- The FY22 budget season progressed, including the Finance Committee proposing the FY22 revenue objective (\$18,107,297), which was approved by the Board of Directors at the March BCTDA meeting. Additionally, meetings were held with department heads for a mid-cycle budget meeting to ensure organization-wide tracking for budget deadlines.
- Continued to schedule meetings for Vic with staff, tourism community members, elected officials, stakeholders, and strategic partners.
- Terminated Dianna Pierce from employment effective March 26.

Future Updates:

- Prepare for and execute the BCTDA's April meeting, to be held virtually April 28, 2021.
- Complete hiring process and prepare to onboard new VP of Sales, Marshall Hilliard.
- Schedule departmental retreats related to further developing tourism's four strategic pillars.
- Continue working with Craft HR Solutions on a compensation study for Explore Asheville.
- Finalize and send to staff a plan to return to the office, with COVID safety policies and protocols in place to allow two departmental teams alternating being in the office every other week beginning May 3.
- Continue finalizing the FY22 proposed operating budget, as well as TPDF and Earned Revenue budgets, to be presented to the Finance Committee, followed by presentation at the May BCTDA Meeting.